

HEART AND SOUL CONVERSATIONS

# ANXIETY AND YOUR CHILD'S BEDTIME ROUTINE

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## **INTRODUCTION**

We have all experienced the stress and frustration of putting our kids to bed. It's the end of the day, you've had a stressful and exhausting workday, your child has experienced a difficult time adjusting to his new school and making friends, your teen is stressing about fitting in and tests, your husband and yourself are going through some financial difficulties and are having moments of arguments and tension with one another and all you want to do right now is to get the kids to bed and go to sleep yourself.

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During the caveman times through evolution and in some cultures aside from the Western one, small children don't sleep alone. Consider this from an evolutionary perspective. A long time ago when our ancestors were at the mercy of the environment, they lived, slept and ate together as a way to protect everyone in the tribe. Leaving a child alone at night would have surely made them vulnerable to being attacked, stolen or dinner.

Time has moved on and we have evolved, but unfortunately that wiring stays long after its' purpose is gone, we're still wired to equate closeness with safety, ie: safety and protection is "stuck" in our reptilian/**animal brain**.

## **CHILDREN AND PARENTS' CHALLENGES AT BEDTIME**

Some kids are perfectly fine with being tucked up tight and kissed goodnight and are happy to fall asleep on their own. For others, the tendency to be scared of potential threat remains.

Reason and problem-solving lies in the frontal lobes of the brain, this is the part of the brain where we process and make sense of emotions, or rationalising things (eg: prefrontal cortex/ cognitive or the **thinking brain**).

Our brains ONLY START to mature until about 5-6 years old. That doesn't mean that kids at that age will immediately feel okay with being left alone. We all function, develop and progress differently, therefore our brain runs its own schedule.

**FACT:** the frontal parts of the brain (**thinking brain**), are only FULLY developed and MATURED at about 24 years old.

### **Possible Reasons Why Challenges Happen At Bedtime Are:**

- Anxiety
- Overstimulation or stressful day
- Discomfort or pain or illness
- Fears (dark, monsters, intruders, robbery, dying, seperation)
- Changes in the home/ family/ school environment ie: needing to adjust to a new environment or routine

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- Horrible or scary images seen or heard from screentime, movies, news as well as trauma and stories/ experiences told by others
  - Sensing parents' stress, low self-confidence, insecurities and uncertainties

## **ANXIETY**

You need to understand anxiety to know where it comes from and understand why our children react in certain ways and why the above challenges are all linked to the anxiety and stress of the brain.

American Psychological Association: 2020, states: *"anxiety to be an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also have physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or a rapid heartbeat".*

Take note that the anxiety or stress comes from external sources that the physical body is experiencing or has experienced and can be imprinted in the brain as a negative memory (hippocampus- memory part of the brain), this experience or sensation on the body triggers the fear or anxiety within the amygdala, sending a message to the rest of the body to react to this fear or worry and therefore increases the physiological symptoms of the body as stress or anxiety or panic.

What you need to remember is that there is no talking sense to the person or child when they are in their panic or tantrum mode (the **thinking brain**/ prefrontal cortex is at 'shutdown'). The amygdala (**feeling/limbic brain**) is overactive and we need to calm it down through certain techniques.

**[See Addendum: How The Brain Functions When Stressed and How The Brain Functions During Sleep]**

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## **SLEEP:**

Oxford English Dictionary, 2020:

“a condition of body and mind which typically recurs for several hours every night, in which the nervous system is inactive, the eyes closed, the postural muscles relaxed, and consciousness practically suspended.”

Without sleep you can't form or maintain the pathways in your brain that let you learn and create new memories, and it's harder to concentrate and respond quickly.

Sleep is important to a number of brain functions, including how nerve cells (neurons) communicate with each other. In fact, your brain and body stay remarkably active while you sleep. Recent findings suggest that sleep plays a housekeeping role that removes toxins in your brain that build up while you are awake.

Sleep affects almost every type of tissue and system in the body – from the brain, heart, and lungs to metabolism, immune function, mood, and disease resistance. Research shows that a chronic lack of sleep, or getting poor quality sleep, increases the risk of disorders including high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression, and obesity.

**[See Addendum: How The Brain Functions When Stressed and How The Brain Functions During Sleep]**

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## **WHAT TO DO TO MAKE BEDTIME EASIER**

### **1. PARENT BE STRONG AND CALM:**

Parents need to feel self-assured, not aggressive. Confident but loving, but mostly patient and calm. If you feel you cannot cope and are too highly stressed yourself ask for assistance from your partner, spouse, or child's grandparent, but of course if you can do it yourself, the better. A child can pick up the uncertainties or insecurities of the parent, therefore needing to be confident about taking your child to bed needs to be presented in your tone and body language.

### **2. GIVE THE CHILD SOME CONTROL:**

It is natural for a child to want to control or "manipulate" the situation, this especially happens when they feel anxious or when they are not in control of the situation or their environment (eg: bedtime). The child wants to also make choices and be independent in what they want or need. Minimise the battle of bedtime by giving them other ways to be in control – let them choose their pyjamas, the story, the toy that gets to travel with them by bed to dreamland. Give them control over the little things so they will (hopefully) have less need to fight you on the big one. **[Tool: Sleepy Quackie can be used here]**

### **3. CONSISTENCY X3!**

A study from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine states: "that stretched across 14 countries has found that a regular bedtime and a consistent nightly routine improves sleep in children. The more consistency in the routine, the greater the positive impact on sleep. Children with a regular bedtime routine have earlier bedtimes, fall asleep quicker, wake less during the night and sleep for longer. They also have less problems generally and fewer behaviour problems during the day. Bedtime routines involve a set combination of happy, calming activities before bed. Activities might include a warm, peaceful bath, brushing teeth and reading a story".

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#### **4. NO SHARING BEDS (only husband and wife!):**

Parents please do not lie down and fall asleep with your children in their beds (or them in yours). You would like to promote a sense of independence and empower the child to be able to fall asleep without your constant presence. If this is going to be a struggle for you, you must understand that you will struggle with separation anxiety when it comes to dropping off your child at school or having some sort of “space” from your child wherever you go, as he has become reliant on your closeness and can’t do without it (it’s also not healthy for you and your husband or wife or partner). You must admit, kids sleep restlessly and move all over the bed, leaving you with minimal space, so not even you are having a good night's sleep. Then you have the one parent who can't actually sleep with the child in their bed and so they go sleep in the child's bed (playing musical beds at night). This is not healthy for the husband-wife relationships and causes lack of sleep and grumpiness the next day, for all members of the family and therefore short tempers and less patience. You may cuddle your child (why not) but not with lights out and not too long, better during a story so that when the story ends and the lights go out, then the child will know when the cuddle will end too (definite/ clear ending).

#### **5. LET THEM FALL ASLEEP INDEPENDENTLY:**

If they fall asleep while you are present or too cuddled up with them, they will most probably wake up in the middle of the night (maybe more than once) in fear to see you are gone, as you were the last thing he saw and felt and therefore very frighteningly will call upon you in the middle of the night or takes himself to your bed.

#### **6. BUILDING TRUST (“In And Out The Room”- only parents allowed):**

When the child is in bed, you only sit by his bedside or within the room for 2-5minutes, then whisper you need the bathroom and will be back (of course, pretend if you really don't need it, remember...to flush the loo anyway, they are listening), return to the room, no talking, sit down in the room. Repeat the exit after 5minutes again, by saying “I forgot something on in the kitchen, I will be back”, extend your time away from the room (remember to make a “noise”), return to the room. This is why it is called the “In And Out The Room”. Repeat this till your child has fallen asleep on his own (without you being

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present in the room). This gives him the ability to fall asleep without having you constantly there in the room and he trusts you will return. He also needs to know that you are present within the household, it doesn't have to be "up close and personal". The fact that he falls asleep on his own as well, empowers him (prefrontal cortex- achieving a goal increases dopamine levels which gives a sense of empowerment).

## **7. HOW TO HELP THEM TO RELAX:**

### **★ Toy or Plush:**

Let them have a toy or plush with them that makes them feel safe or that they feel secure and comfortable with. Explain that the toy is also sleeping and that the child must try keep it asleep by breathing and moving very slowly and gently so as not to wake it (doing slow movements and slow breathing, calms the nervous system).

### **★ Sensory/ Proprioceptive/ Hyper/ Highly Sensitive And Hypervigilant Kiddies:**

They need a little more attention or goodies to assist them to fall asleep. Some need a deep massage or pressure, some may need a tickle or a soft rub on the back, others a weighted blanket or plush to regulate or calm their bodies, maybe some need slight movement (the body senses grounding which sends message to amygdala to calm down).

### **★ Item That Smells Like Mommy Or Daddy:**

Having an item of clothing that belongs to the parent can help the child to fall asleep as the olfactory sense can help the child calm down when he has mommys smell near as it makes him feel safe or secure (amygdala calms down).

### **★ Just before lights out you can practise the Belly Breathing:**

Place a plush on his belly and breathing in slowly with the nose and breathing out slowly with the mouth (belly and plush moves up while breathing in and down while breathing out), this should help the amygdala calm down.

## **8. SOUND OR MUSIC:**

Drowns out any sound or noise that may be frightening to them or noises they may be hearing or "imagining" or any unexpected noises that may keep them awake. Use white

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noise, a fan or soft relaxing nature or instrumental music that he feels comfortable with, this should help ease the auditory senses that are on alert mode and it should calm the amygdala. **[Tool: White Noise App or myNoiseApp]**

## **9. NO NIGHT LIGHT:**

It is fine for the initial few minutes to help the child feel safe but not to be on the whole night. Room needs to be in total darkness in order for your **circadian rhythm (also known as your sleep/wake cycle)**, basically a 24-hour internal clock that is running in the background of your brain and cycles between sleepiness and alertness at regular intervals, to function effectively. A part of your brain called the hypothalamus controls your circadian rhythm. That said, outside factors like lightness and darkness can also impact it. When it's **dark** at night, your eyes send a signal to the hypothalamus that it's time to feel tired. Your brain, in turn, sends a signal to your body to release **Melatonin** (produced by the SCN cells), which makes your body tired. That's why your circadian rhythm tends to coincide with the cycle of daytime and nighttime. Which in turn produces the **GABBA**, which induces **muscle relaxation**, sleep, reduces stress, lowers anxiety and inhibits muscle movement. This occurs in stage3 of the sleep cycle where you have a deep sleep.

## **10. FRIENDLY, AGE APPROPRIATE, COMFORTABLE AND INVITING BEDROOM:**

- ★ Make sure there is **thick curtaining**, it drowns out the sound and light.
- ★ **Not too many toys** and pictures that could cause distraction or creating scary images or shadows. Keep it neutral and tidied (otherwise use sleep mask to cover eyes, please check with your child first if ok).
- ★ **Position of the Bed:**

The most common nighttime fear for children is fear of intruders. The position of the bed in the room can help to maximise feelings of safety and security.

Research by ([www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)): explored the preferred layout of a bedroom from an evolutionary perspective and has found that people prefer to sleep in a way that would theoretically maximise safety from potential intruders. There were no doors and windows way back when humans first came along, but there were caves and cave entrances. The



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study found that:

- If the room has a door and no window, people will prefer to sleep in a bed that allows them to see the door without having to move their heads very much. Try to avoid the door being behind the bed.
- If the bedroom has a window, people will prefer to sleep in a position that lets them see the door and the window when their head is on the pillow.
- If it's not possible to see both the door and the window at the same time, people will prefer to sleep so they can see the door.
- People prefer to sleep further away from the door (but still able to see the door). The assumption here is that the further they are away from the door, the more time they have to keep themselves safe from an intruder.

### **11. CORRECT ANY WRONG INFORMATION:**

Misinformation (e.g. from television) has been found to feed a high proportion of night-time fears in children. One study ([www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)): reported that 88.98% of children attribute their fears to negative information they've picked up along the way. Just be aware of what your child is watching (the news can be the most frightening thing on television because it's real) and talk to them about anything they're scared about. If they see something on TV and they're worried about it happening to them, point out how their **circumstances are different**. Finding the differences will help to loosen the association between what they've seen and their own circumstances.

### **12. NIGHTMARES OR BAD DREAMS:**

Night-time fears are common for children. A study ([www.europepmc.org](http://www.europepmc.org)) reported that 73.3% of children aged 4-12 are affected. About a quarter of kids will have at least one nightmare every week. One of the most common themes is the violation of their personal safety – kidnappers or burglars often dreamed about. Other common themes for children are separation from people they care about, loss of loved ones, imaginary creatures, and being chased by a scary person or animal.

Dreams usually happen during Stage4 of the sleep cycle. This is the stage where REM (Rapid Eye Movement) happens, the brain is active and muscle movement temporarily

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paralysed due to the GABBA so dreams do not get physically acted out. May occur two or three times in the evening. During REM the Amygdala and Thalamus are activated and aroused. Thalamus sends the Cortex images, sounds and other sensations that fill our dreams, which gives it the feeling of the dream being real. The Amygdala processes the emotions from the sensations picked up by Thalamus, therefore child will cry after having a bad dream.

**a) Explain Where Bad Dreams Come From:**

Things are scariest when we don't understand them. Children can do amazing things with the right information, and explaining the physiology behind their bad dreams can go a long way towards empowering them.

**[See Addendum: C) Explaining To Children Where Bad Dreams Come From]**

**b) Choose Your Own Adventure Or Ending To The Dream:**

Dreams and nightmares come from our own thoughts, feelings and memories and because of this, we can change them if we want to. Harvard researchers ([www.hms.harvard.edu](http://www.hms.harvard.edu)) have found that by practicing a different ending to the dream just before bedtime, the content of the dream during sleep can be changed. Spend about 10 minutes talking to your child about an alternative ending for their dream. Because the dreaming brain uses pictures, rather than words, talk to them a lot about the imagery – colours, size, images. If the bad dreams change, or if they can't remember them, have an ending that would be always safe, eg: finding you and being scooped up into your arms, safe and sound. If the nightmare is a recurring one, practice the alternative dream ending each day by talking about it to build up its strength and vividness and the ease with which your sleeping child can call on it when they need to.

**c) Explain Why Scary Feelings Happen After A Bad Dream:**

The memory that the child has of the bad feeling (emotion) that came after a scary dream can be enough to cause difficulty going to sleep at bedtime. Here's what happens..... Since

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the language/ thinking part of the brain (prefrontal cortex) is inactive ("sleeping") during sleep, it cannot really make sense of the experience (dream). The thinking brain needs words to put the experience into logical sequence- "this happened, then this happened and then that happened...."

Whereas the cerebral cortex part of the brain processes and interprets visual information retained from the occipital part of the brain during the day, therefore dominant in images (which is the main function of dreams). The amygdala receives the images and senses danger and is overwhelmed, bringing on the fear.

In order to help your child make sense of their big feelings, recruit the thinking part of the brain by putting words to their experience:

- ★ First, acknowledge how scary bad dreams can be. This will help your child know that you get it ... 'Bad dreams can feel awful can't they. I feel scared sometimes when I have bad dreams too.'
- ★ Next – if your child is okay with it – ask him or her to describe the dream. Don't force them though. If they want to talk to you about it, awesome – let them go for it. Otherwise, let it go.
- ★ Confirm that your child understands that it's a dream and it can't hurt them – even though in the dream it feels like it can.

#### **d) Explore What Powers They Can Take:**

Kids have a great capacity to take things from their waking world into their dream world. Here's how:

- ★ Ask them if they could take anything into their bad dream, what would it be? Something to fight off the baddies or dissolve them? Dissolver dust (called 'glitter' for short), might be just the trick. Maybe a monster trap, like monster spray (see

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below for recipe- “Dream Monster Spray”). Perhaps an invisibility cloak (a small sheet) to hide from the baddies? Perhaps they need you (your photo under their pillow) or a magical fortress (ask them to draw one).

- ★ Talk to them about how they will use their special ‘power’. How does it make them feel? Strong? Safe? Powerful? Magical? This will help to strengthen the thought, experience and emotion to influence the content of their dreams.
- ★ Have them put their special thing under their pillow (if it’s safe), on their bedside table, or anywhere close by.
- ★ Prime them before they go to sleep, by asking them to imagine themselves taking their special thing into the dream and using it.

#### **e) Dream Monster Spray or Baddie Spray or Alien Spray or Whatever is Pushing Their Way Into Their Dreams:**

The idea of this is to use something to build their feelings of safety. Here are FAQ by the children (....sometimes to avoid sleep):

##### **★ *Does this mean monsters are real?***

Nope. No way. Absolutely not. Promise. There are no monsters but sometimes your mind can make them up. This will help settle your mind down and stop those scary things coming into your dreams.

##### **★ *Where do you get it from?***

You make it yourself. Here’s how. Get yourself a spray bottle and fill it about three-quarters with warm water. Now, add a few drops of lavender (or any other essential oil that’s known to be lovely, as in relaxing). That’s it. Done. Easy as that.

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★ ***What do you do with it?***

Spray it around your room. You don't want to go nuts with it. Or maybe you do. But about 5 sprays should do it.

★ ***That seems too simple. How do you know it works?***

Because the scientists said so – they've done heaps of research into how your brain works. Have you ever met a scientist who didn't know what they were talking about? Nope. Me neither.

★ ***How does it work?***

Two ways. First, it relaxes your brain – and a relaxed brain is a happy brain, which makes it more able to dream happy dreams. Second, dream monsters hate lavender. They can't stand it actually. It makes them shrink down to nothing, but first it makes them (and you) very sleepy. Dream monsters don't like anything that smells nice but lavender is the one they hate the most.

★ ***Will it give me muscles?***

What? No. That's what green peas and bananas are for. But don't eat them together – that's just gross.

★ ***Will it make my hair shiny?***

No. But sleep will.

★ ***Do I still have to have a bath?***

Wait. What? Yes of course you do.

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### ★ *Why?*

Because dream monsters hate anything that smells nice but they hate nice-smelling humans most of all.

### ★ *What if I think of another important question?*

Just ask a grown-up who loves you. They tend to know important stuff. They're good like that. Otherwise they will find a scientist to ask.

### f) Getting A Peak Into Their World:

All dreams are fuelled by your child's own thoughts and feelings. Exploring the dream with them, or listening to them while they describe it, can reveal wonderful insight to your child, and about your child, and give them a sense of control. Look for clues that might be telltale signs of their fears and vulnerabilities. This isn't about interpreting their dreams, but about looking for feelings or issues that might be happening in real life and finding expression through their dreams.

## CONCLUSION

It's normal for kids to struggle with bedtime at different times throughout their lives. It's important to understand that we use the same parts of the brain when we get anxious as well as when we go to sleep. It's important to know what tools need to be used to calm the brain which will in turn calm the child in order for your child to be able to sleep, producing the proper sleeping chemicals to have a good night's rest and to recover from anxiety, moodiness and illness. With time, persistence and consistency and some creative tools, you should be well on your way to la-la-land...or at least your child should be.

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## **RESOURCES**

- <https://www.ninds.nih.gov>
- <https://blog.daveasprey.com/gaba-neurotransmitter-supplement-anxiety-sleep/>
- <https://thesleepdoctor.com/2018/06/19/understanding-gaba/>
- <https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-101>
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com>
- <https://www.heysigmund.com>
- <https://www.hms.harvard.edu>
- <https://www.europepmc.org>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>
- <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/what-circadian-rhythm>
- <https://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/education/resources/highschool/chemmatters/past-issues/archive-2014-2015/the-science-of-sleep.html>
- American Psychological Association: 2020
- Oxford English Dictionary, 2020

## **ADDENDUMS**

- **A) How The Brain Functions When Stressed and How The Brain Functions During Sleep**
- **B) Glossary Of Terms**
- **C) Explaining To Children Where Bad Dreams Come From**
- **D) Circadian Rhythm**
- **E) Stages of Sleep**

## **TOOLS:**

- **myNoise App**
- **Book: Hey Warrior by Karen Young (for kids with anxiety)**
- **How To Make A Quackie To Assist With Bedtime**

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## **ADDENDUMS:**

### **C) EXPLAINING TO CHILDREN WHERE BAD DREAMS COME FROM**

**By Karen Young ([www.heysigmund.com](http://www.heysigmund.com))**

Here is an example of the words to use when you chat with them about it. It doesn't all have to all happen in one conversation. Nobody knows your kids better than you, so adapt it to suit you.

*'When you go to sleep, your brain stays switched on and keeps working hard to look after you. Here are some of the things it does:*

- ★ *it puts what you've learnt into your memory;*
- ★ *it works through the things you've been taught to make sure you understand them;*
- ★ *it sorts through your memories, or the things that have happened during the day to help you feel okay about them.*

*Dreaming is the way your brain sorts through your feelings to make sense of things for you. Your brain does this while you're sleeping because during the day your brain is way too busy doing other things.*

*You dream in pictures because the words part of your brain takes a little nap (it works so hard during the day!) The other part of your brain that takes a little rest is the 'sensible' part that tells you what's possible or impossible, sensible or completely ridiculous. When this part of your brain is asleep, anything is possible! There are absolutely no limits which is why you can dream of flying to the top of the world in your very own jet – rainbow coloured of course, with an indoor swimming pool, and your very own toy shop and rock stars who tell you funny jokes while they clean your room. There's just nothing in the way to say, 'Sheesh! Don't be silly! That would never happen.'*

*Sometimes the information your brain has to sort through is stressful, confusing or scary and it might turn this information into a nightmare. Your brain doesn't do this to upset you – it wants to look after you. Remember, it only has pictures to work with because the words part of your brain is asleep, and there's nothing to tell it to calm down with the crazy stuff, because the*



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*sensible part of your brain is also taking a little break.*

*This is why it's so important to talk to a parent or someone who cares about you about things that are upsetting or confusing for you. By doing this, your brain will have less to sort through at night-time, so there will be less chance of things getting turned into nightmares. Grown-ups are very good at listening. They practically invented it. They can help you to make sense of things and they'll never think anything you have to say is silly or not important. Grown-ups were kids too once, so they're very experienced at kid stuff (although kids will always be the experts).*

*Sorting through your feelings is just one reason people get nightmares. You might also get nightmares when you are sick or if you've heard or seen something scary on television, in a book or on the internet.*

*It's important to understand that the panicked feeling you get when you wake up from a bad dream isn't because something scary is going to happen. There's a good reason for feeling scared after a nightmare and it's because of a part of your brain called the amygdala. When people dream, the amygdala is really firing.*

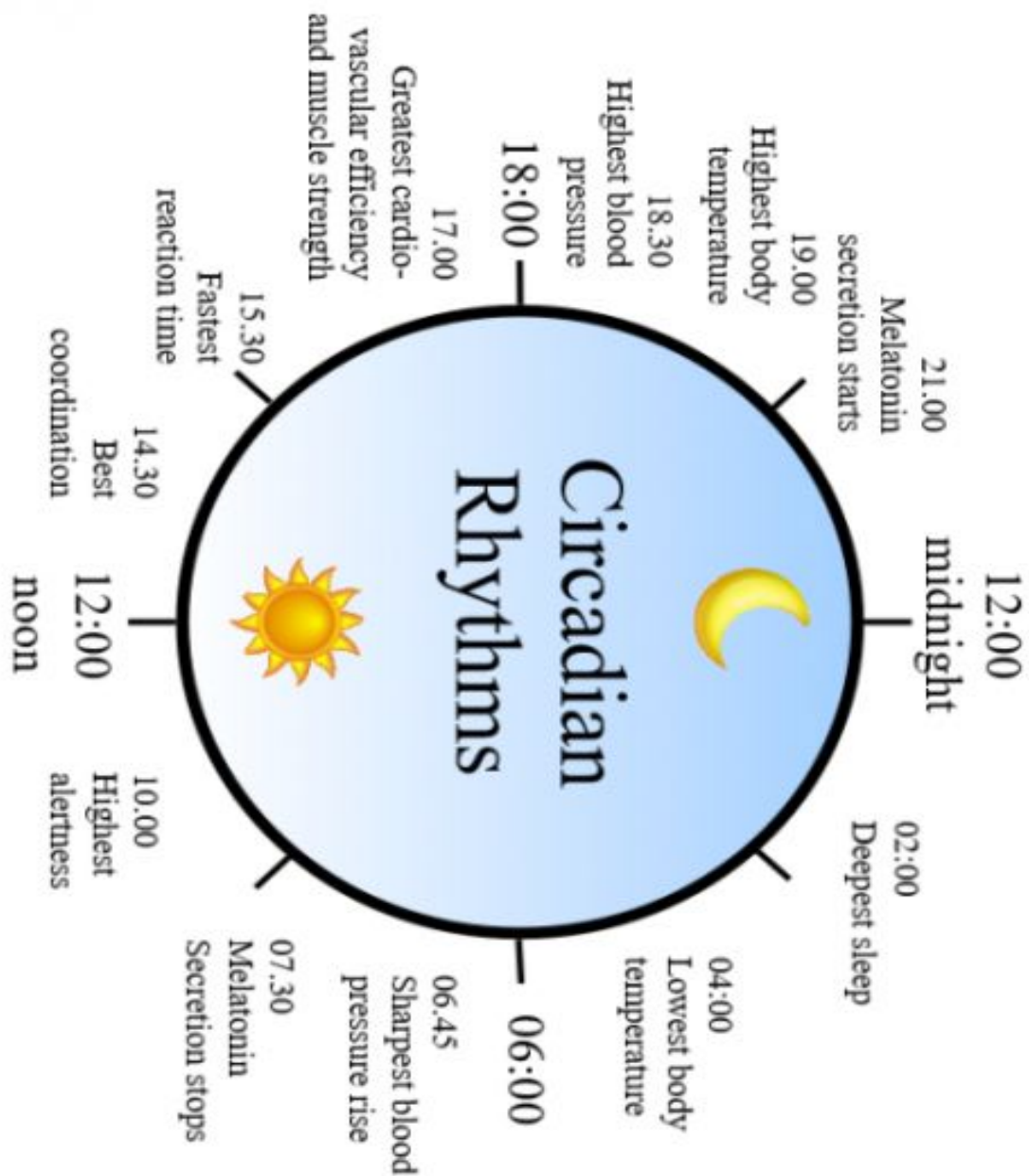
*The amygdala is an almond-shaped part of your brain and its job is to keep you safe by letting you know that there might be trouble. It's kind of like your own fierce warrior, there to protect you. The amygdala does a brilliant job of keeping you safe, but sometimes it will send out a warning when there's absolutely nothing to be scared of. It's a do-er not a thinker, so it's very good at warning you, but not very good at thinking about whether or not you actually need a warning. This is why you feel scared when you wake up from a nightmare.*

*When you feel scared, it will help to breathe deeply (because that settles down your amygdala), have a cuddle with someone who loves you and that scared feeling will soon go away. It can be hard to remember to do strong, steady breathing when you feel so scared, but don't worry because I'll be there to remind you. We're a great team you and I and we're going to sort these bad dreams out.'*

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## **ADDENDUMS:**

### **D) CIRCADIAN RHYTHM**



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## **TOOLS:**

- **myNoise App**



- **Book: Hey Warrior by Karen Young (for kids with anxiety)**

